

Opening Address

Senate President Pro Tem William P. McKenna

January 7, 1998

Lt. Gov. Wilson, ladies and gentlemen, friends and family, distinguished guests,

It is my pleasure today to welcome you to the opening of the second regular session of the 89th Missouri General Assembly.

Session openings are exciting times filled with seemingly endless possibilities. We re-acquaint ourselves with our friends and colleagues, every bill and issue is still very much alive and we have not had to say no to a single citizen, agency, public interest group or lobbyist -- yet.

This place is a lot like school. We come to class when the bell rings, we are exhausted by mid-May and we always, but always, look forward to recess.

As President Pro Tem of the Senate -- and as a state senator -- this will be my last regular session in the Missouri General Assembly. Oh, there might be a kid named McKenna running somewhere for something but term limits will soon end my own tenure as a state legislator.

I would ask my friends in the press corps to not refer to me as the "first victim" of term limits in Missouri. In my opinion the citizens of this state will really be the first victims of term limits. After all, they are the ones who will be denied experienced representation in their General Assembly.

I look back and realize how fortunate and blessed I have been. Sixteen years ago today, I was shoveling snow off a construction site and I was thinking to myself I really need to find an inside job because I am freezing to death. Yes, I am fortunate. In fact, we are all very fortunate to have the support of our constituents and to have the opportunity to experience public service in the Missouri Senate.

Having been President Pro Tem for a little over a year, I am here to tell you that experience matters. Experience matters not just on this dais, but on the Senate floor and in the halls, the committee rooms and the offices of this wonderful building. Those who do not think that experience matters when addressing the issues I've seen come before the General Assembly are fooling themselves. Soon this body and our state will lose that crucial asset known as legislative experience.

If I had a single wish this year, it would be for a session that is special. You will notice that I said a session that is special -- not a special session. I've had my fill of special sessions.

I want a session that is special for all the citizens of this state. A session that we can all be proud of and that demonstrates what all of us here know: that the legislative branch of government is the closest to the people and the most responsive to the needs and desires of the citizens we serve.

This year, we have an opportunity to do some very special things for the people of this state.

If you are interested in bringing additional and meaningful tax relief to the citizens of Missouri, this can be the year.

If you are concerned about preschool opportunities and improving access to health care for the children of Missouri's working families, this can be the year.

If you are interested in helping bring an end to unaccountable federal judges controlling our schools, this can be the year.

If you are interested in halting the manufacture and abuse of a new and dangerous drug, 1998 will be the year.

Just a few years ago, this state was under water, literally and figuratively. Now, we are on top of the world and our future looks brighter than ever.

A few years ago, the state courts were threatening to take over the foundation formula for funding public schools. Today, the federal courts are ready to give us back our schools.

Just a few years ago, we were fighting to raise revenue for public schools. Two weeks ago, the Supreme Court said we could finally give \$700 million back to the taxpayers of this state.

The fact is, things are so good in our state that we can keep not only our promises -- but promises past General Assemblies have made as well.

That's what we did last year here in this Senate when we kept a promise to extend tax breaks to all of our retired citizens. This Senate kept that promise -- a promise made 11 years ago.

We voted to eliminate 3 cents from the sales tax on food and we established credits for maternity homes and domestic shelters -- a proposal that had been around for at least five years.

This year, we again have the opportunity to cut taxes in our state.

By expanding our state's Circuit Breaker program and by implementing a homestead property tax credit, we can cut taxes and provide meaningful property tax relief.

Last year we cut taxes on food, this year we should cut taxes on shelter.

Tax cuts are not the only promises that have been made in state government. Seven years ago, the General Assembly approved an ambitious highway improvement plan presented to us by our state Highway Department.

A lot of promises were made and we expect those promises to be kept.

When you make good on a promise, you prove your trustworthiness and accountability. With respect to transportation, we must dramatically improve accountability to make good on a promise to the citizens of Missouri.

We must move steadily and prudently forward to complete the highway projects that were promised in both Proposition A and in the 15-Year Plan. The transportation needs of our state will not decrease. In fact, I am sure they will increase over the next few years. But in order to regain the trust and confidence of the citizens of Missouri, we must enact stringent and verifiable accountability measures.

We know that our transportation system is one of the many things that are vitally important to the future of this state. However, the thing that is most important to the future of this state is the educational opportunities we provide for our young people.

Just 22 years ago, our state constitution referenced the separation of school children according to the color of their skin. This was a shameful period in our history. We were wrong.

Just 14 years ago, the federal courts took away from the General Assembly the authority to appropriate funding for education. Those same federal courts took away from the local citizens the authority to control local districts.

In this session we have the opportunity to bring to a close one of the most difficult periods of public education in this state: the court-ordered desegregation payments involving the Kansas City and St. Louis School Districts.

How far we have come. How far it is from constitutional segregation to ending court ordered desegregation. We are almost there. Our success will depend on our actions this session.

To simply abandon the districts under federal court control is senseless and shortsighted. I believe these districts would collapse financially and would ultimately be placed under state-funded operation. For us in the legislature to turn our backs when the finish line is in sight would be wrong. We are better than that.

As we move away from the era of court-ordered desegregation, there is still the enduring promise of a quality public education. And in keeping that promise, we must turn our efforts from financial battles to learning battles.

In Kansas City and St. Louis, the federal courts ordered us to pay for better schools. However, we can not order children to score better on tests. Shifting our attention from educational cost to educational quality is the key. And it has to start with teachers, parents and families.

We expect our schools to produce children with strong and healthy minds. Yet despite the great prosperity of our state, many of our young people still lack access to basic health care that will ensure a strong and healthy body.

With a simple change -- and a minimal expense in state dollars-- we can correct that. This isn't welfare. This is an opportunity to expand a program funded primarily by the federal government to bring basic and adequate health care to children who really need it and whose parents can not afford it even though they work for a living.

Children are Missouri's greatest natural resource. Healthy minds -- and healthy bodies -- are promises we should be keeping to the children of Missouri.

Access to basic health care is not the only issue that concerns the young people of our state. The public health is threatened by a new and dangerous drug called methamphetamine.

Meth is very powerful, is highly addictive and, unlike other drugs that must pass through protected borders, it can be manufactured in dangerous makeshift labs here in Missouri. Often these makeshift labs are located in our neighborhoods and near our schools.

The horror stories surrounding the meth problem in Missouri are frightening. And from manufacture to abuse, it presents a whole new set of problems for our law enforcement officers, our communities, our environment and our children.

One of our capitol pundits has stated that the methamphetamine problem is the one issue that everyone in this chamber can agree on.

I think we can agree on that issue and I think we can agree on a whole lot more. We are reasonable and earnest people in a deliberative arena. And we are blessed with an opportunity to do great things for the citizens who sent us here and who have entrusted us with this sacred task.

Remember ladies and gentlemen, we are the upper chamber. In the Missouri Senate we are respectful and tolerant of each other. Our differences, our diversity and our independence make us strong. Our ability to listen, to compromise and to find solutions to difficult problems must remain our trademark. The citizens of Missouri, our bosses, deserve nothing less than our best and most sincere efforts.

Let us resolve to make 1998 a session that is indeed special for the people of Missouri and one which will leave me with a proud smile on my face and many happy memories.
